DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 003 SO 028 970

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TITLE Homeless Mothers: Their Lives, Their Identities, and Their Children's Education.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 37p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Fatherless Family; Feminization of Poverty; *Homeless People; Mother Attitudes; *Mothers; Parent Influence; *Poverty; Social Science Research

ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study focuses on two homeless mothers and their efforts to support their families. The study reveals how the mothers came to be homeless and how this experience has affected them. The work examines the experiences of the mothers with and perceptions of their children's education as well as the roles the mothers play in the educational process, ways in which the mothers supported their children's education, both formally and informally, and the factors which acted as barriers and supports in this process. The study provides insight into how educators and social service providers might support women and their families to ensure their children receive a free and quality education while they are homeless. The sections of the paper include: (1) a review of recent literature; (2) description of the study and methods used to collect data; (3) findings of the study; and (4) conclusions and implications. (EH)

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Homeless Mothers: Their Lives, Their Identities, and Their Children's Education

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Paper Presented at the
1997 Annual Conference of the
American Educational Research Association
Chicago, Illinois

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Homeless Mothers:
Their Lives, Their Identities, and Their Children's Education

The Research Problem

The growth in the number of homeless mothers[1] with school age children has been perhaps the most striking feature of the homeless population in recent years. Since the early 1980s the number of homeless families has been increasing in both numbers and as a proportion of the total homeless population[2] (Little, 1993). In 1988, forty percent of the sheltered population was comprised of families, almost twice the proportion five years earlier[3] (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1988). Families make up a bigger share of the homeless population today than at any other time in recent United States history (McChesney, 1993).[4]

Homelessness among women is an increasingly studied issue.[5] However, few have examined the experience of homeless women as heads of their families. And there is no systematic research that examines the role that homeless mothers play in their children's education and development. Similarly, no systematic research examines the effect of educational, social service, and philanthropic providers in this process.

In response to this lack, the ethnographic research reported in this paper focused on two homeless mothers and their efforts to support their families. It reveals how they became homeless and how this experience has affected them. It examines their experiences[6] with and perceptions of their children's education as well as the roles the mothers play in the educational process. It describes the ways in which they supported their children's education, both formally and informally, and the factors which acted as barriers and supports in this process. Finally, this study provides insight into how educators and social service providers might support women and their families to insure their children receive a "free and quality education" while they are homeless (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1989, p. 1).

This paper is composed of five main sections. The first section provides a review of recent literature that is relevant to this research. In the second section, I describe the study and the methods used for data collection and analysis. The third section presents the findings of the study. In the final section of the paper, I present my conclusions and discuss the implications of the research.

Literature Review

Homeless Children

Recent studies placed the number of school aged homeless children any where from 100,000 to 500,000 on any given night (Johnson, 1992) and suggest the numbers are growing. For many of these children, homelessness negatively affects their lives in at least three primary areas: physical health, physical and emotional development, and education. First, Edelman and Mihaly (1989) indicated that homelessness adversely affects the physical health of homeless children. Lack of health insurance and

funds for medical care, lack of access to bathing facilities, exposure to the elements, poor diet, shared living, eating and bathing quarters with large numbers of people, and inadequate sleeping arrangements are some of the health risks. Homeless children are also more likely than other children to develop upper respiratory infections, serious skin disorders, anemia, eye disorders, and dental problems (Wright & Weber, 1987). Redlener (1989) pointed to unsafe environments and the presence of illegal drugs as further risks.

Secondly, in addition to the impact on physical health, homelessness endangers emotional health (Edelman & Mihaly, 1989). Families are put under extreme stress. Close living quarters, disrupted routines, periods of family separation, and parental depression can also weigh heavily on children. Johnson, Davidson, Jackson-Jobe, and Linehan (1990) asserted that the daily uncertainty about meals and shelter in conjunction with being separated from their homes, belongings, friends, and pets cause homeless children much distress.

A third risk involves the education of homeless children. Homelessness places the educational opportunities of these children in jeopardy. Three general areas of research address the education of homeless children. One group focuses on the attendance patterns of homeless children. A second focuses on the educational experiences of children while they are homeless. The third area examines the responses of schools.

School attendance. Homeless children are less likely to attend school on a regular basis. A 1988 study of homelessness in eight U.S. cities found that forty-three percent of homeless children did not regularly attend school (Maza & Hall, 1988). A Congressional report (U.S. Department of Education, 1990) indicated that over 67,000 of the estimated 240,000 homeless children counted in state surveys did not regularly attend school. School attendance often wanes due to feelings of discouragement resulting from frequent changes and absences, and some are reluctant to attend when they lack appropriate school clothes and supplies (U.S. Department of Education, 1989).

Educational experiences. Those who do attend often experience learning difficulties that inhibit their academic progress (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988). Bassuk and Rosenberg (1988) found that forty percent were failing, forty-three percent had repeated at least one grade, and twenty-five were in special classes. Similarly, Bassuk, Rubin, and Laurait (1986) found that fifty percent of the homeless children included in their survey suffered from developmental lags, anxiety, depression, and learning difficulties. Also , the performance of homeless children on achievement tests are consistently among the lowest (Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). Further, many have sleep, behavior, and psychiatric problems. Although some of these behaviors (e.g., shyness, aggression, withdrawal) may be viewed as adaptive, they are still disruptive to the average developmental course.

Responses. A number of state agencies have implemented programs designed to ensure the free and appropriate education of this population. There is, however, a great deal of variation between state plans and even greater variation among district programs. Some districts created shelter schools[7] to

provide educational services to homeless children (Berger, 1990; McCall, 1990; Stronge & Tenhouse, 1990). Other districts have sought to educate homeless children through regular campus programs. Proponents of each reveal both positive and negative aspects of each program type in terms of meeting the needs of homeless children (Johnson, 1992). The most effective programs, according to McCall (1990), provided remedial education when needed, trained school officials about the problems faced by homeless families and students, provided academic and emotional support for homeless children, involved homeless parents in their children's education, coordinated educational and social services, implemented flexible enrollment procedures, and provided individualized instruction.

In sum, we have learned that the physical health, physical and emotional development, and education of homeless children are at risk. This information has been used to develop and implement programs for homeless. However, while many of these programs are making tremendous efforts to address the educational needs of these children, there seems to be a lack of emphasis being placed on the homeless children as a members of families.

Homeless Mothers

Homeless mothers have characteristics which differ substantially from those of single homeless persons, making them a distinct population (McChesney, 1993). The studies which have been undertaken provide information on the general characteristics of the women in this population and their relationships with their children.[8] Similar to the literature on homeless children, however, the literature on homeless mothers has failed to provide adequate emphasis on these mothers as partners in their children's education.

General characteristics. Homeless women tend to live below the poverty line,[9] have one or two children under the age of eighteen (McChesney, 1993), and face a critical lack of affordable child care and other services (Bulman, 1993). Further, many homeless mothers lack the skills necessary to obtain employment that provides compensation adequate for supporting their families and, thus, are particularly vulnerable to extended and recurrent struggles with homelessness (Bulman, 1993). A lack of extended family and/or support networks, available to housed families of similar circumstances and status, is another common characteristic of these families. Further, many of these mothers are fleeing an abusive situation (Bulman, 1993; Hagen & Ivanoff, 1988; Redmond & Brackmann, 1990).

Mother-child relationships. A few projects have investigated the relationships between homeless mothers and their children. These studies found that homelessness appears to distort the mother-child relationship in ways detrimental to the child and the family as a whole (Little, 1993). Little (1993) reported that mothers may develop an unhealthy dependency on older children, thus switching the parent-child role. Redmond and Burke (1990) argued that the violence inflicted on these mothers, often witnessed by their children, also complicates the mother-child relationship.

Beyond the damage which homeless besets on the mother-child relationship, little else is known about this relationship. It is unclear what effect this relationship has on the self-efficacy of either the

mothers or their children, and the literature neglects the child-rearing practices of homeless mothers.

Their children's education. A paucity of information also exists on the role of the homeless parent in their children's education. Only one study focused on the perceptions of homeless parents regarding the education of their children. The study, which included one single mother and two couples whose children attended a shelter school, revealed that parents perceived education as very important for their children (Yon & Sebastien-Kadie, 1994). These parents viewed education as a source of stability, as a safe haven, and as a key to the future. This study also revealed a number of actions the parents took to support their children's education. These included buying bus passes, paying someone for transportation, or arranging for their children to live with family or friends in order to stay in the same school as well as advocating on behalf of their children.

There does exist, however, a wealth of literature which examines the barriers many homeless parents face when attempting to enroll their children in school. Many homeless children are denied access for a number of reasons. These include residency requirements, guardianship requirements, lack of transportation, incomplete records, and special educational requirements (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1987). Residency requirements in some districts make it difficult if not impossible for homeless mothers to enroll their children in school. The National Coalition for the Homeless (1987) found that parents were being told by school districts that they could not enroll their children because they were not residents because of the temporary nature of their shelter. Acquiring documents required for school enrollment (e.g., records from former schools, immunization records, and birth certificates) can also serve as a barrier to school attendance. The nature of homelessness makes the maintenance of such records extremely difficult, and acquiring records often involves costs that homeless families cannot bear (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1987). Even when residency and records problems were solved, many homeless children did not attend school because of transportation problems.[10] Other difficulties include maintaining continuity in educational services, obtaining information on and access to special services, obtaining school supplies, clothing, counseling, tutoring, and other social services (Johnson, 1992).

In summary, studies of homeless mothers indicate that they have very little means for supporting their families, that their relationships with their children often become distorted, and that they have a difficult time enrolling and keeping their children in school. Little else has been written about mother-child relationships in homeless families or about homeless parents and their children's education. Given, however, that young children depend on their parents for care and early learning, it is important to understand what such learning and care looks like for homeless families as well as how educators might support parents in these efforts. Unfortunately, the literature addressing educational interventions for homeless children typically leaves the parents out of the equation.

From these studies of homeless mothers and children, it becomes clear that families without homes suffer profusely, and that the effects which homelessness has on children may be pertinacious as well as enduring. Children are at risk of health, developmental and educational problems. Meanwhile, their

mothers face substantial barriers in their attempts to support their families and their children's education. . While caring professionals and after school and summer enrichment programs are important (Stronge, 1995), the role which the parent plays is primal and, thus, deserves much attention.

The Study

The research method and design involved an ethnographic field study[11] of two homeless mothers (Van Maanan, 1979; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethnography refers to the naturalistic study of people's social activities as they occur in everyday situations over extended periods of time (Agar, 1986). My intent was to obtain an in-depth understanding of who these women were and how they experienced being homeless women and mothers. The time and sustained contact, characteristic of ethnography, allows the researcher to build relationships with the mothers which, others have argued (Liebow, 1993), makes for a fuller and more accurate account of their perceptions and experiences. The ethnographic method provides the most effective means for traveling into the lives, thoughts and experiences of the research participants.

The women were chosen based upon two primary criteria: they had school-aged children and they were participating in a program which had given me permission to conduct the study. Each of the mothers was approached individually about participation and each agreed to participate.[12] Because a full description of each of the women will be provided in the findings section of the paper, the remainder of this section will focus on research context.

The program in which they were participating is privately run and provides a "rotating home" for four families. The program, which in a city in central Texas, was established in 1993 in order to mobilize thirty church facilities and member volunteers to provide temporary housing and social services to homeless families. It provides a "rotating home," a phone number for potential employers to reach the families, and transportation to work sites for the parents and to school for the children. By "rotating home" I mean that the family stays at one church for a week and then moves on to the next church. In addition to shelter, the churches provide an evening meal, breakfast, a private room for each family, showers, laundry facilities, a place to store their belongings during the day, and volunteers to assist and entertain families on week nights and weekends.

At the time of this study, the housing occupancy rate in the area was over ninety-seven percent, and the city has the highest rental costs in Texas and the fifteenth highest in the country. The number of women, children and families who are homeless in this community is increasing and demand for shelter and housing is greater than the local providers can meet.[13] Similarly, a recent study by the city's school district estimated that over 8,000 homeless youth are living in doubled-up households, motels, shelters, and transitional housing.

The school district in this city provides education to homeless students in the school of the families' choice and in regular classrooms. High school students do have the option, however, of attending a special program for homeless youth at one of the local high schools. The school district also provides an

outreach person who works with the local Salvation Army and other community organizations which serve homeless families with school-age children.

My participation included spending time, eating, and talking with families, playing with and watching children, hanging out, and helping clean or straighten things up. I also kept a research journal in which I kept my reflections on my research process, insights, and theoretical notes. In addition to being a friendly listener, I also was a familiar face amongst a constant flow of new volunteers. This too I think added to our conversations and the type of information they were willing to share with me.

As a result of their interest and on the advice of both Elliot Liebow and Ruth Behar,[14] I started bringing my husband to the shelter infrequently as well as to special events (e.g., school carnivals, parties). Both of the families came to know my husband. These visits helped strengthen my relationship with these women. They knew me as more than just the woman who came into their lives and asked questions and helped out. I was a woman with a life and a family.

The sustained encounters allowed me to establish a relationship which was reciprocal in nature. Instead of simply asking questions and eliciting responses regarding material that I wanted to extract, I felt freer to allow the women to control the flow of many of our conversations. This benefited them in that they were taking part in an exchange in which they were a primary actor. An additional effect included attempts by the mothers to equalize our relationship. After a certain number of evenings together, both women started asking me questions about my own life and provided me with advice on men and child rearing.

The data were collected and analyzed from October, 1995, through December, 1995. I visited the organization's day room and/or the church at which the families were staying two to three times a week during this period. The data discussed here were taken from interviews, both formal and informal, conversations, and observations. Conversations with mothers involved their perceptions of themselves and experiences being homeless, their interactions with social service providers, educators, and private agencies, and their interactions with and support of their children. Formal interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed (Patton, 1993). Informal interviews and conversations were recorded in my field notes. Observations of the general operation of the shelter-churches as well as mother-volunteer interactions, mother-child interactions, and child-volunteer interactions were also recorded in my field notes (Thomas, 1993).

The data were analyzed following the conventions of qualitative research methods (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1995). Data analysis in this study began during the first interview, as the information garnered in the interview was analyzed for its use in formulating follow-up questions. Similarly, the transcriptions and field notes from each successive interview and/or interaction was used in preparation for the following encounter. During the preliminary analysis of each of the interviews, an open coding method was used to determine categories that emerged from the data. Subsequently, a process of more systematic and through analysis was undertaken. This process involved a detailed reading of each transcript, the identification of several overarching themes, and the marking of

excerpts of the transcripts and field notes according to the themes. Due to limitations in space and time not all of the research findings could be discussed within this paper; the themes chosen for inclusion in the paper were based on the purpose of the research.

Several difficulties arose in the process of the research. The first problem is more closely associated with my research topic and reflectivity[15] than with the nature of ethnographic research per se. Prior to meeting each of the mothers, I experienced an acute sense of guilt and nervousness. I was concerned that I might not be able to establish rapport with the women or that they might be suspicious of my intentions. I was also very concerned about the "gaze." That is, given my own "privileged" positionality and resources and their lesser access to resources and social status and approval, how was I to work with them without exploiting them. I wondered "am I helping or hurting and who is to decide?" I still do not know the answer to this question. I decided that, at this point, the questioning was more important than finding answers. It heightened my awareness of my actions, intentions, and assumptions. It made me more sensitive to the power differentials between myself and these women as well as that between them and their benefactors.

A second problem involved the "end" of my relationship with my first mother. While I spent a great deal of time with her and came to know and enjoy her as a person, I always saw a beginning and end for our relationship. However, I had not considered until the end how she viewed our relationship. She made it clear that she was not happy with the idea of ending our relationship when she left the program and I moved on to another mother. On several occasions she gave me her new phone number, has called me, would like to go out on a double date. As I left her apartment on the day I helped her move into her own place, she said with tears in her eyes, "don't be a stranger." We have talked on the phone twice since then.

My final comment on my ethnographic experience involves the analysis and the written document. When I analyzed my data and began to write, I felt a strong responsibility to the women. I did not want to misrepresent them, and I was very concerned that through my interpretation and analysis that I was overemphasizing certain points that perhaps were more important to me than they were to the women themselves. While an attempt was made to use the participants' own words as much as possible, I came to the conclusion that as an ethnographer, I can only convey my own understandings of my observations in my account. As I am certain numerous others have said: everything heard, said, seen, transcribed and written was filtered through my ears, eyes, heart, and hands.

Research Findings

In this section, I present the research findings. While a vast quantity of raw data was collected during the study, only a small portion from the detailed, final analyses is presented here. I begin with a brief biographical sketch of each of the women with whom I worked. I then discuss the effect that homelessness may have on their identities and, thus, on their ability to meet the expectations of their immediate benefactors as well as of broader society. Following this, I discuss a number of individual and

situational characteristics which contributed to their circumstance and future prospects. Discussions of the overall observations are augmented by verbatim accounts from the mothers.

The major finding which emerged from this study was that the mother's views of their present and future lives were affected by at least two factors: their social positions and the effect of homelessness on their identities. The interplay between and among these factors can either support or detract from the ability of a mother to advocate for herself, support her family, support her children's education, and to eventually emerge from homelessness.

The Women

The women[16] who participated in this study were identified through a community program that houses homeless families. Participants were chosen based on the following criteria: at the time they were involved in the study they were homeless, they have school age children, and they were willing to participate in the study. While, I do not claim that the women I have included in this study are representative of other homeless women with school age children, I am fairly convinced that their experiences and the problems they face are similar to and have relevance for other women in similar circumstances.

Liz. Liz, a thirty-two year old, Anglo woman is married and has one child. Liz is of average height but overweight. She speaks softly and often appears tired which may in part be due to her anemia. However, she smiles easily and reports that she likes people who make her laugh.

Liz was born and raised in a small town in Iowa. She was the fourth of four children. When she was young she was shy and reports that she was afraid of people. "I used to be scared of people. I used to hide . . . . Whenever someone would knock on the door, I would go hide under my mom's bed." Since her marriage to her husband, Nathan, she believes she has become more outgoing and no longer lets people walk all over her.

While in public school, Liz was placed in Special Education (SED) classes until the 6th grade when she placed out of it. She indicated that she needed the extra attention and that she preferred the smaller classes. She and her sister were the only members of her family to graduate from high school. She later attended a community college for a year and a half, with the intention of some day becoming a kindergarten teacher. She quit school in middle of the Fall semester of 1992, due to her father's death and health problems that required her to spend time in the hospital. During this semester, she also met and married Nathan.

Nathan and Liz have been married for three years. She met him when he was a lay minister at her church, and they "hit it off real fast. We have been together ever since. It has been really neat." Childhood cancer had made Nathan sensitive to the cold and less than a year after they married, he decided they should move to Texas. Liz stated that the move also allowed them to "be a family."

Liz's eleven year old daughter, Christina Cameron (CC), is from a former relationship. CC's natural father left them soon after she was born, and, thus, Liz has raised CC primarily on her own. She supported

herself and her child through a number of food service jobs and spent some time receiving Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). She describes her daughter as "really smart" and reports that she "keeps me going." Since they have moved to Texas, CC has attended ten different schools. She is presently enrolled in a local public school and is educated in a regular education classroom. She is a high energy child and is described as having behavior problems by both her parents and her teacher. However, CC has managed to get average grades, and Liz has volunteered at her school on two separate occasions this year.

In addition to demonstrating her support for her daughter's education, Liz has expressed on several occasions the importance of education. She stated that education is "really important," and stayed informed of what CC is doing at school through their after school talks, CC's daily report binder, progress reports, and the notes and papers sent home by the teacher. She did not have a conference with the teacher this year, however, because the teacher did not call her at the designated time. Liz was unable to take time off during the week the teacher had set aside for parent conferences so she and the teacher had arranged a telephone conference. Because Liz has access to a phone during a limited period of time, she and the teacher agreed upon a time. In the end, the teacher failed to call, and Liz did not pursue it.

Liz support of education was also manifest in her desire to see CC finish high school and attend college. She believed that CC's public school education would provide her with an opportunity to learn about computers. "Gives them skills, and they can get jobs, better paying jobs with computers. You know and it gets them ready for college. I like that idea cause everything is going computers." She indicated that unlike her own mother, she was going to make sure that CC got everything that she needed to be successful. She emphasized that she wanted CC to obtain a good education to avoid the kinds of problems that may lead to homelessness. "I don't want her to end up like Nathan and me. . . . I don't want her to end up like I did."

Liz and her family "end[ed] up" homeless for two primary reasons: a lack of affordable housing and a lack of employment which provided adequate compensation. Liz began the story of her family's homelessness at the point when they departed from her hometown in Iowa. From Iowa, they moved directly to Corpus Christi and lived there for a little over a year, both she and her husband worked in the food service industry. They moved to a number of different locations in the city, and CC attended several different schools. At the end of the school year they moved to Houston. They both worked at Astro World for the summer, and CC had a summer season pass. When the season shifted the work schedule to weekends only, they moved again. Unable to find housing or jobs and with resources running out, they soon found themselves homeless and broke.

They spent the next few weeks living day to day. They went from church to church to shelter for assistance. They worked day labor and carried all of their belongings with them as they attempted to find a place to stay each night. Most nights they were able to gather enough funds to stay in a motel or were offered shelter in a church member's home. However, they also experienced what it was like to "sleep

rough." For instance, on at least one occasion, Liz and her family huddled behind a Texaco station for the night, but she did not like thinking about these times, she said.

They entered the church-shelter program by luck, according to Nathan, and fate, according to Liz. She said that something told her to go back to the church that, in the end, assisted them with entry. This program assured them a little more stability than they had been recently experiencing. Liz got a job as a short order cook, and Nathan enrolled in a nurse's aide course, graduated, and got a job as a nurse's aide in a nursing home. While in the church-shelter program, they saved their money and looked for a place to live. Two and a half months later, they left the program and moved out on their own.

Liz and her family were homeless for just under four months. Her stories about her experience as a homeless mother, however, demonstrate that the time she spent with her family on the streets had a tremendous and lasting effect. In fact, a week before leaving the program Liz revealed that old problems were causing her to be very concerned about the future. While unsuccessfully trying to hold back tears, Liz said "He is just picking on me. I told him I wasn't feeling good, and I'm so scared it is gonna happen again. The drinking. I don't know what we'll do. I'll have to take CC and go home. He doesn't listen or doesn't care. How can he be so mean? Ugh. It is reminding me of before."

Rachel. Rachel is an Anglo woman in her early thirties, but she looks somewhat older. She, like Liz, is overweight, has long hair, and a ruddy round face. Rachel has three children, and they became homeless for the first time in the Fall of 1991.

Rachel grew up in Texas, moving with her family to a number of towns and cities. She was the oldest of three children and describes herself as "the good girl," "the role model." "No one ever told me what to do. I just did it." When she graduated from high school, she entered a community college with the intent of transferring to the University of Texas at Arlington. Her plan was to become a film maker. However, with two years completed, she met and married her husband and never returned to college.

She was living with her husband for twelve years before she left him. She described life with him as "unbearable." Her husband discouraged her from pursuing her education further, failed to support her efforts to get a job, and rarely let her go anywhere other than to her children's school. "I did what I had to do. He got stranger and stranger, and his family got stranger and stranger." She described her husband as emotionally abusive,[17] and felt that his abuse was to some degree encouraged by his mother, who she described as "controlling" and "manipulative." Further, Rachel revealed "there was alcoholism there so I was the scapegoat. . . their enabler." "I took all that I could."

Seven months pregnant, she left with little other than her two girls. She came to the city of this study, where her mother lives, but ended up at the shelter for battered women when her mother refused to let them live with her. She has been on and off the streets since that time.[18] However, like many homeless women, Rachel's homelessness is not a result of a single catastrophic event but due to a series of misfortunes.

We came into the town homeless. Had a place to stay afterward. Then we gave that up. I

> listened to my mother actually and we have been having problems ever since. And now I wish I hadn't listened to her because I can't get back to where I was. . . . So we have been kinda stuck ever after that. Just struggling.

"Just struggling," however, is an understatement. Since leaving her first apartment, Rachel has been in and out of shelters, motels, apartments, and the homes of "friends." She has been on and off welfare and workfare, enrolled in training programs, and taken advantage of by "friends" and "con-artists." Her children have been emotionally and sexually abused by roommates, taken away from her and placed in foster care, and eventually returned. Commenting on her experiences over the last four years, Rachel said, "I have been through the ringer."

In addition to experiencing abuse, foster care, and homelessness, Rachel's children have also been placed in and pulled out of at least seven different schools. While in foster care, her two girls were placed in resource classrooms and labeled Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Her eldest daughter, Jen, was put on medication. Rachel believes that her daughters have ADHD and understands the effect which the disorder has on their schooling and behavior; however, she was not happy about their placement in SED without her consent. Last year she was instrumental in having them both mainstreamed and would like to have Jen taken off medication. She has made her wishes known to school personnel, but, to this time, her request has gone unheeded.

Rachel has expressed many negative feelings toward the school personnel she has dealt with in the past. She reported that on a number of occasions, they were rude and condescending to her. Further, she named a number of schools as being insensitive to homelessness and as not being good places for children with high energy levels. As a result she has moved her children in and out of a number of schools.

All three of her children have behavior characteristics of homeless children, frequently exhibiting aggressive and acting out behaviors coupled with a preponderance of attention and affection-seeking strategies; additionally, the girls have demonstrated anger and frustration. In fact, it was the behavior of her eldest daughter which led to their eviction from one shelter.

> It was kind of an indirect thing. Because you see she couldn't keep her mouth shut, could not stay with me, could not do as I asked, and kept talking with everybody and sitting with everybody else. See I would rather her sit with us at the supper table, the dinner table. Oh, whenever we went to the dining room, it was horrors for me. It was always the same thing. They ran around in everybody's business and were just horrors. And they did it the whole time we were at Salvation Army, and this one woman took the disliking to us. Specifically, she directed at me, and she started with my children not minding me. And she took offense at that. She said it was directed against her. I told her it wasn't. "Quit lying to me!" type thing and I went "no, it isn't like that. . . ." And eventually it was her and her daughter that got us evicted or exited from the Salvation Army. Because my kids

> could not keep to themselves. They could not follow the rules, and they wouldn't mind me at all. [this was said with a tone of indignation]. And over there because of the way the rules are, you can get in trouble a lot quicker.

Rachel is presently enrolled in an administrative secretary program and says that she wants it so bad she "can taste it." However, unlike Liz, she does not talk about the future. The stories she tells are of the past and present. When she does mention the future, it is typically embedded in an expression of uncertainty.

The stories these women told of their lives demonstrate two very different paths to homelessness. They also show the differences among homeless families in terms of length of homelessness, family make up, exposure to abuse, and social support requirements. However, while each of the mothers had her own special concerns, each worked to keep her family unit intact and her children in school. The amount and type of support they provided differed, but the support was there.

The Homeless Identity: An Analysis

The homeless live within worlds in which they often must play the role of recipient. As a recipient, they are placed in dependent positions, much of their control is taken away from them, and they live much more publicly than the average citizen. According to research on identity formation, identity is established maintained, and altered through social interaction. Scholars have also argued that while identities can be developed through socialization and social interaction, individuals do not simply incorporate roles[19] into their identity (Buber, 1969). Rather, the roles are subject to interpretation. The actor's interpretation depends in part on the perceived social script, in part on what s/he brings to the role, in part on what other actors do with their roles, and in part to the audiences for whom they play. Goffman's (1969) discussion of interaction posits that when we appear in the presence of others, we will attempt to convey an impression of ourselves which it is in our interest to convey. This impression management, according to Goffman (1969), is undertaken by all participants in the social situation.

Alternately, a number of scholars have discussed the way that people form and reshape their identities based on the experiences that they have. Resocialization, which Sheehy (1976) describes as a radical restructuring of a person's identity, behavior, and values, is perhaps the most extreme form of socialization. Resocialization can involve acquiring a new identity through indoctrination into an organization such as the military (Moskos, 1970), or it can involve the transformation of identity due to a behavioral or life change, such as "Becoming a Marijuana User" (Becker, 1953).

In the remainder of this section, I will use elements of these theories to delineate some of the forces and factors which come to bear on the identities of the homeless mothers included in this study. It is my contention that the experience of homelessness for mothers contributes to the development of a homeless identity or homeless self. The situtations in which they find themselves and the interactions which they have with their benefactors all contribute to an unnecessary form of social domination. This repression is built into the norms of interaction in such a way that it promotes the socialization of

dependency and thwarts efforts to gain independence.

For ease of exposition, the analysis is presented in a series of subsections that coincide with major thematic categories. These include: stereotyping, playing the role of recipient, experiencing a loss of control, experiencing patterns of instability, and being forced to mother one's children in public. Importantly, these categories emerged through the process of conducting research rather than having been specified by the researcher a priori. However, as noted above, the analysis was guided by identity theory.

Stereotypes. Both Liz and Rachel talked about the "stigma" attached to being homeless and how it felt to be looked at and stereotyped as homeless. For example, Rachel explained:

> Well, you know there is this stigma about us. . . . That we aren't good parents, not good responsible people. That we can't or won't work, that we are stupid! Ha! They look down their noses at us you know. Very condescending. Like the school people, they talk to you like you don't understand them.

Only Liz denied having these characteristics. Rachel presented the stereotypes and demonstrated her disapproval through body language, but did not verbally deny the assertions.

Liz described her family as a "hardworking, loving family" and liked to share stories of how she and her family had helped others (e.g., watching children, sharing food, loaning money). She also repeated favorable comments that others had made concerning her family. For example, "You remember those people you met at the church last Saturday? They said we was the hardest working family that has ever been in this program."

It is understandable, however, that they would fight these stereotypes, given that they frequently interacted with people who held stereotypical views of the homeless. One evening, Liz was talking about her work schedule and that of her husband's. An older woman who was sitting at the table with us said, with a shocked look on her face, "Oh you both work? I didn't know you worked." Liz answered, "Yes, we are saving our money to get our own place." To which the woman replied "Oh, you're planning to leave." Liz smiled pleasantly. Later that evening, she talked about stereotypes. "You know, you should try to let people know about homeless families. Like that one I was telling you about at the Salvation Army. We aren't like they think. You know."

Rachel also has had to deal with the stigma attached to homelessness. Before school started, she gathered together her children's shot records and birth certificates and headed off on the bus to register her girls for school. She relayed the following incident:

> Well, I still had to fight a little bit because I was after the actual official time enrolling time, and I didn't know it. I don't know. But they still had the enrollment things out there so I didn't think anything of it. . . . I knew I had to enroll them pretty quick so I did. I filled everything out, and I started asking some questions. Then this woman, [she] had this attitude after ignoring me the whole time. "Where did you find those?" I said "right here in

> this box," and she got over there as quick as she could in a bee line and picked them up. I thought, "how rude." She said "well, noon is our deadline before we can take anymore then they won't be on the sheets." So I hurried up and finished. Then I had to tell them my situation. And immediately the stigma. They think we try to get away with things.

In addition to dealing with the effects of stereotypes on themselves, these women are also having to protect and/or cushion their children from the effects of stereotypes. Liz revealed that her daughter's teacher had at one time been treating her unfairly because she was homeless.

> They were being really um cruel. Something she had to have. . . for her like her pencils and stuff. One of those zipper things. They were giving her a hard time cause she didn't have that. . . . They knew she was homeless. The kids don't know but the teachers do. They know. It was just because the fact that she was homeless. . . . That is the way we felt. Cause she didn't treat anyone else that way. Just CC.

Liz was also concerned about protecting her daughter from being labeled homeless amongst her peers as well.

> Nobody knows that she is homeless. That is why they do that with the bus. They drop her off at the Salvation Army last. The teachers know. The teachers do. . . . She felt embarrassed about it--about the homeless thing. She was real embarrassed about it. She didn't want any kids finding out about it. Cause the kids would tease her if they ever found out, but they don't know cause the rule how they do it with the bus. That is why they do that so that nobody knows. Nobody has the idea that they are homeless.

Of course keeping this secret has its price. Because CC did not want any of her friends to know that she was homeless, at her birthday party, there were only church people, the program director, the other homeless family, my husband, and myself. The only time, then, she saw classmates outside of the school day was at the school carnival.

The recipient. While homeless, mothers may become the recipient of a number of services. Finding shelter and accessing social services is not easy. It requires a large amount of time and energy. Typically, one must have funds to ride a bus where one needs to go (e.g., the Social Security Disability Insurance office, the Workfare office, the Housing Assistance office, a shelter, the food bank, a clothing distribution center, a clinic, your child's school) or walk there, and if you do not have a place to store your belongings, you must take them with you. Liz and her family had to do all of this while searching for a place to stay.

> You have to drag your stuff everywhere. And then come back and bring it back every night. Because we did that for...we did that for the last first week we were here. I mean before we got into the church shelter program. We were doing that. We were going from church to church to get help, and we had to drag our stuff with us.

Once you reach your destination and fill out your forms, you may spend days or weeks on waiting lists or

being evaluated for eligibility and often times must deal with service providers who are insensitive.

Being a recipient at the church-shelter introduced an interesting group of perceived role expectations for these mothers. They seemed to behave as if they were obligated to follow the rules, to frequently express their gratitude, to be pleasant, to be present, and to be helpful. Complying with these perceived expectations was a major preoccupation for these women, and at times it seemed to leave them feeling disempowered.

The mother's efforts to be pleasant was demonstrated on numerous occasions. Typically, when a person approaches a social service provider, they are assessed as to whether they are deserving. On several occasions, I observed the shelter volunteers participating in this evaluation ritual. Regardless of whether their intent was arrant, worthy or based on curiosity, the outcome was the same. The women were put in the role of the benefactor and their needs or lack thereof were being assessed. On at least one occasion, Rachel was cognizant of this, commenting later on a volunteer's "curiosity."

On the evenings that I was present, I took part in and/or listened to conversations that I had taken part in and/or listened to on previous occasions. Many of the same questions were asked; many of the same topics were covered. Not only was there considerable redundancy, the topics and questions were often very personal in nature (e.g., their situation, children, jobs, health, AFDC checks). Further, the topics and questions were primarily prompted by the volunteers. On only one occasion did I hear one of the mothers ask a volunteer a personal question. For the women in Liebow's (1993) study, "having to answer questions was part of the price they paid for being powerless" (p. 137).

Another indication of their powerlessness was frequent interruptions. On countless occasions, I witnessed the mothers' activities, conversations, and telephone calls being interrupted for reasons which were often times very superficial. My own discussions with the mothers were interrupted quite frequently. During one formal interview, we were interrupted twenty-two times by four different volunteers during a ten minute period. The mothers never showed any resistance. On the contrary, they often would stop whatever activity or conversation in which they were engaged to give their full attention to the interrupter.

The rules for the church-shelter program included following the schedules set by the program, taking care of their children, and limiting and getting approval for visitors. Liz was extremely conscious of the scheduled times for different events and frequently made statements about it:

> We gotta leave at one thirty and so are they. We gotta leave at 1:30 like everybody else does. So. See we cant be back here until 5:30. Cause there wont be anyone to let us in. See no one. So if we get here early, I'm gonna get something so if we get back early and have to sit over or something.

While both mothers frequently introduced me as their friend, the rule limiting one's ability to have visitors was not far from their thoughts. Almost every evening that I spent at the shelters, I was asked who I was and what I was doing. After explaining, the mothers would quickly point out "its alright. She has permission." On one occasion a young male volunteer questioned me for about ten minutes on my study

in a rather unpleasant tone.[20] Before I left that evening, he walked me to the church door asking if I was planning to publish my results. At a different church, a volunteer replied to our explanation with "well I guess it is OK, if the director gave you permission. Run along then." Neither the director nor I had considered the possibility that the volunteers would question my presence, but the mothers did. They knew.

In addition to experiencing a loss of power and control, being a recipient requires that one frequently express one's gratitude for all of the things that are being done for them. Liz often referred to the help that the church volunteers and program staff had given her. She thanked people for the meals they prepared and thanked them for clearing the table. She thanked people for volunteering and for their donations. Thanking people was such a common interchange for Liz that on several occasions I heard her thanking people who she had been assisting. For example, one Sunday afternoon she and her husband had just finished helping one of the volunteers bring in a number of boxes that belonged to one of the other families. She ended up thanking the volunteer.

Gratitude was also expressed through the stories that the mothers told in their conversations with the volunteers. One story that Liz often told follows:

> So it [being homeless] was kinda hard for all of us at first. But it's been nice [here]. Everyone has been so good to us; they make us feel real welcome. We feel like we are going to go on. We don't feel like they are looking at us like "oh they are homeless" you know. They look at us real funny. We haven't had that problem. It is a nice program. Patti has been a lot of help to us. . . . This program has helped us a lot. Yeah. So. They just treat her like the other kids.

Learning the expected behaviors of the recipient, it seemed, was facilitated informally, primarily through observation. I saw Rachel on three separate occasions during her first week in the program, two of which were at the church where they were staying. She was very quiet on those evenings and stayed in the same location for a large part of both. She sat with several volunteers the first night, talking, primarily when asked a question, and watching. She also shadowed Liz's actions. When Liz went down to the community room, Rachel soon followed. At dinner time, she waited until Liz had gone to fill her plate before she did. She helped when Liz helped. It was my impression that she was attempting to learn the proper rules for behavior, the rules for interaction, and how to interpret the actions of others. In other words she was learning how to be the guest. More recently, Rachel has begun to use the phrase "thank you" more frequently in her interactions with the volunteers.

Loss of control. While homeless, the women also lost control over a number of aspects of their lives. Their schedules, and thus how and where they are able to spend their time, are controlled to a large degree by the rules of the shelter where they are staying. And, any deviation from the rules must be approved in advance. Further, a lack of funds and transportation also limits the choices the mothers are able to make.

The amount of control these women had over their lives was, this, limited while living in shelters. Every day there is a schedule, and these schedules place limitations on their movements. On the weekdays, families must be up and out of the church by 7:00. At 5:00 in the evening, the families must be at the day room and prepared to leave for the church-shelter. At 6:30 the evening meal is presented. The curfew for the evening is set at 10:00. And while there is an opportunity to sleep in on Saturdays, activities are scheduled for them, and attendance is often encouraged and/or required. According to Rachel, however, the church-shelter provides much more freedom than the Salvation Army, where the schedule is even more strict.

Rachel felt that the schedules limited what she was able to do for herself. "At the Salvation Army, I couldn't get the help I needed. I had to do things on my own. So that is the kind of attitude that I took, and they used that against me. 'Well you are gone all day, you don't fit into our hours.'" Similarly, Rachel, having been told on numerous occasions that her children needed therapy, feels the lack of control over her present situation will make accessing counseling services difficult. "The kids and I have just been through a whole lot. The therapist has recommended that the kids go through play therapy or counseling. My concern is because of the strict scheduling, when am I gonna do it? I don't know." Thus, even if she was able to obtain counseling services, she feels that the rules and schedules that she must live by might prevent her from receiving them.

Rachel also felt a loss of control over providing for her children when the weather began to grow cold. She lacked the time, transportation, and child care to enable her to go to the storage facility where she pays to have some of her belongings stored.

> We have coats--ways to keep warm right now. He needs his heavy coat. It is in storage. In a bag somewhere in the midst of storage. So is my coat. I have two very warm coats. . . . If I could just get into storage. I keep saying this all the time, if I could just spend some Saturday, all day. Which I would have to bring them. Just go through the storage and take them out. And I can't [said with exasperation]. I have to bring them [her children] with me, and they just go all over the place. And I was told by the management there that they just can't do that. That one over there she just kinda hem-haw tries to take care of them [talking about Jen, her oldest daughter]. So I can't trust her, and the other one, she is impulsive so I never know what she might do. She might be real responsible one day and then turn around the next day and just completely you know not worry about what Rick is doing. And he went and hid in a truck the last time we were over there. We I wouldn't ever have found him if he hadn't made some noises. . . . So I just. Like, I hesitate to do it if I don't have anyone to watch them. So, I don't know I have just pretty much given up that idea.

Liebow (1993) referred to problems such as these as "'the little murders of everyday life' that confronted homeless women" (p. 48). These activities demand so much energy and attention that, if done, they

make it difficult for one to focus one's attention on much else.

Liz also experienced a lack of control over the activities of her family on several occasions. For example, one evening when Nathan had to work late. Liz decided to wait until he arrived to eat her dinner. A volunteer, however, told her that she did not need to wait on her husband. "Dinner is served at 6:30, we can save him a plate. There will be plenty of food for him to eat when he got here. You should eat with us." Liz sat down with the volunteers and other families; however, her eyes watched the door throughout the meal, and she seemed somewhat uncomfortable with the situation.

Similarly, while explaining the arrangements of her daughter's birthday party, Liz was confronted by a volunteer. The woman wanted to know if Liz had asked permission to have "a bunch of people over?" Liz said that she had and then went on to explain that a woman from the church was baking a cake. The woman from the church interrupted her and asked if "they [are] going to be eating dinner? Because if they are going to eat, we'll have to tell the women who are cooking." Liz answered that they would just be coming for cake and ice cream. She was still smiling, but it was obvious that her enthusiasm about CC's party had lessened substantially. This form of communication, like the one-way conversations and questions, demonstrate the lack of power and control and control the mothers have over their lives.

For Rachel in particular, being homeless made it very difficult to protect her children from harm and cruelty. In order for her children to be able to sleep with a roof over their heads, Rachel often endured treatment which she found demeaning and demoralizing. Moreover, she was often unable to protect her children from the same treatment.

> Well, when we were staying there [the Salvation Army], the staff were really to hard on some of us. They weren't always nice. And I didn't like the treatment I got, and I didn't like the kids to have to go through that, and I shouldn't have.

Similarly, while living with friends, she often relied on them to watch her children. When they complained or made unreasonable demands, Rachel felt she was not in a position to argue or resist. She said she attempted to be as pleasant and helpful as possible and encouraged her children to do likewise. When she discovered that her children were being abused, she moved out of the situation immediately. However, she realized that the damage had already been done. She had been unable to protect them.

A final area over which the women felt they had lost control was their privacy. While living in the church shelter, the families had to do most of their living publicly. They had to share meals, public bathrooms, and community spaces. There were people around from the time they got up to the time they went to bed. Liz commented that she felt like she "always had to have [her] manners on."

Each evening at least three, usually more, volunteers from the church where the families were staying would come to the church-shelter to eat dinner and visit with the families. These volunteers would arrive at about 5:30 in the evening or sooner, essentially the same time the families arrived, and they would stay at the church until around 9:00. At 9:00 the night shift would arrive, usually one or two men who had volunteered to sleep at the church-shelter with the families.

When asked about their privacy, both mothers typically answered with a positive evaluation of the volunteers (e.g., they are nice, friendly, and/or helpful) or with a comment about how nice it was for the children to have positive attention. Alternately, they indicated that an evening of privacy would be valued. For instance, Liz stated "Sometimes we would like to just go into our room for family time just to get away." However, they were more likely to be found sitting around with the volunteers than they were sharing family time in their rooms.

One of the volunteers pointed out that the families are free to go to their room if they like or do not feel like being around anyone; however, it is my impression that the mothers are uncomfortable taking private time, that they do not want to be perceived as being ungrateful guests. Rachel knew from personal experience what might happen if someone decided you were not behaving according to the norm as well as if someone took a disliking to you--there was always the possibility of eviction.

Patterned instability. The high rate of mobility was viewed by both families as a form of instability. The mothers were concerned about the lack of a long term and stable place to call home. July of 1994 was the last time Rachel and her children had a place of their own where they stayed every night. And while they had been homeless previously, Rachel stated "it had never been as bad as it has been this year." In this year alone, Rachel and her family have moved in and out of at least ten different shelters, motels, and apartments.

Moreover, Rachel and Liz agreed that the church-shelters did very little to ameliorate the feeling of instability. The families spend only one week at each church before they must pack up their belongings and move to another location. While they do have a place to store their belongings and know where they will be sleeping that night and that it is safe, the constant moving is "hard on the kids."

Further, the constant turnover of volunteers reinforces the feelings of instability. For example, each evening there are three or more new faces volunteering to spend time with the families. On Saturday's the families may be visited by three different shifts of volunteers: one group in the morning, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. "So many people and different ones every night. Sometimes it is hard. I don't really mind. I like having all the people around. They are all so nice...really nice." Rachel commented that her kids made friends quickly because "they [the kids] are here one day and gone the next." She worries however that this may affect their ability to sustain long term relationships.

One evening while Rachel and I were talking, a woman stopped by the couch where we were sitting to say hello. Rachel's face brightened and she seemed genuinely pleased to see the woman. "Ah a familiar face," she said after the woman left. She said, however, that she could not remember her name because there were so many of them.

The mothers also expressed concern regarding the effects of their highly mobile lifestyles on their children's schooling. Both mothers had, in the past, moved their children in and out of schools frequently. CC had attended ten schools since moving to Texas, and Rachel's children have attended seven different schools since they arrived in this city four years ago. Liz explained that keeping CC in the school she has

been attending when they move out on their own was a high priority. She felt CC was doing too well in the school to move her. Keeping her in the same school, however, may require much effort and expense in terms of transportation and time. In regards to this situation, Rachel too expressed the desire to keep her children in the same school. However, she felt that sometimes the school personnel made that impossible. She wanted to make certain that her children would be treated well. She stated: "I am doing the best I can, but the kids are suffering."

Public mothering. Both of the families, while homeless, lived primarily in the public eye. Thus, the mothers' parenting techniques and habits were also subject to public scrutiny. Further, as discussed in the review of the literature, homelessness effects the behavior of many children in such a way that mothers may find it more difficult to discipline them and raise them with the values they might wish them to have.

Most of the children living in the church-shelters are high energy and spend a large portion of their evenings playing with other children and seeking attention from adults. The following scene, taken from my field notes, reflects a typical evening at the shelter:

> Three children were playing at the elevator door, pushing the buttons over and over, and Julie, one of Rachel's children, was running in circles around the room. Rachel shouted, "You, young lady. Julie!" She then turned to me and said "See this is how my kids listen to me." Julie, looked back at her mother briefly, stuck her tongue out, and then ran over to where a baby was laying in its crib crying. A volunteer, standing near by, made a low screeching sound. Rick was squirting his grape juice all over the floor. I recalled that the last time I was here, he was pouring his apple juice all over the floor, and Julie was screaming that it was pee and she had stepped in it. The woman was mumbling something about paper towels. Rachel shouted "Rick," sighed loudly, and got up. The woman volunteer went into the kitchen area for a towel. Rachel said to her "oh, it is just a little over here. Don't worry. We got it." I looked over where Derek and another male volunteer were sitting. Four kids were climbing all over them. One was doing summer salts from one lap to the other. They wanted Derek to get up and play. One little girl pulled on his hand and said "come on." Rick was tugging on him as well, hugging his leg. A stream of Apple juice sprawled out of the middle of the group. Derek said "Oh, Rick, you are covered." Rick had anther box of juice and was squeezing the box so that the juice came spewing out of the straw. Rachel just shook her head.

According to Little (1990), the effect of homelessness on children has been shown to cause behavior problems, problems that a mother alone can neither control nor ameliorate. Both Rachel and Liz have started off an evening full of energy and determination to have well behaved kids; however, by the end of the evening they often seem worn out and to have given up. "You know, calgon take me away. I just can't do it."

The volunteers at the churches react to the children and their mother's apparent lack of ability to control their kids, in two ways. Those who are more tolerant attempt to play with the kids. Those who are less tolerant, or seem more overwhelmed by it, often stand around and stare at the kids with a look of horror on their faces. They do not say anything about the children's behavior to the mothers, but they do not have to, their faces say enough. Rachel is under the impression that volunteers have on occasion spoken to the director about the children, but at the Salvation Army, the residents and staff were much less tolerant. Rachel revealed that she was told constantly that she needed to "control" her kids. In fact, her exit from the Salvation Army was due in part to the behavior of her oldest daughter.

Although Liz's daughter was also a "high energy" child, Liz seemed less defeated by her behavior. However, since entering the program, she had become intensely aware of the publicness of disciplining children. In response, Liz and her husband devised a more "appropriate" behavior management plan for CC soon after they entered the church program. This involved grounding as opposed to physical punishment.

> We don't spank CC anymore. We have started grounding her instead. I..we think that is better because it makes her have to spend time thinking about what she has done. And why she got in trouble. Then maybe she wont do it again. See? I think that is better than beating a kid--then all they remember is the spankings. It seems to be working she is a lot better behaved than she used to be.

Rachel was also attempting to use new behavior techniques. She had devised a system of points for good and bad behavior and was attempting to ignore or "de-emphasize" her son's newly acquired cussing habit.[21] However, even with new behavior management techniques, there is no assurance that the children will obey. CC often disobeyed her mother, mimicked her, or simply disobeyed her. These behaviors appeared to concern Liz, but she felt that "she will grow out of that. I just need time to teach her what's right." Ruth's children went even further, calling her names, cussing at her, and publicly defying her. Given that these children have seen their mothers being treated as powerless as well as abused, degraded, and/or threatened by people it is likely that they may have developed errant ideas about how their mothers can be treated.

Public mothering is also an issue in terms of their involvement in their children's education as well as in their visibility at the schools. Liz went through a great deal of trouble to show her support for CC's education. She took off an afternoon of work and arranged for her boss' wife to give her a ride, so that she could volunteer at the school. Rachel, however, felt she could not participate formally[22] in her children's education.

> I cant participate like a PTA mother. I just, I just can't. And I don't have that kind of energy to fight the bus system and all the walking and the fighting and the getting em to hurry up cause I gotta do all this walking to get there. You, I just couldn't. I have made some conferences before but this year not at all.

In addition, Rachel felt that the teachers at her daughter's school were rude and condescending. She indicated that most of the communication she had with school personnel was very one-sided. For example, Rachel described a situation where the counselor and teacher met her in the hallway of the school prior to an ARD meeting and started both telling her at the same time about the terrible things her children were doing at school, that they needed SED, that she must have known that, and that the kids needed counseling badly.

> I wanted to have an ARD meeting for Jen, concerning getting her back off medication. I haven't heard a word. . . . Jen still takes a little longer to catch on, and she needs that little extra, but I don't think she needs resource classes. . . . She just doesn't catch on as quick. Boy, once she catches on to something, boy, she has got it. She is not going to loose it. But, It is the teacher telling the parent, not asking, telling.

Rachel said that she smiled and listened and left. Her commentary on the whole situation was "they haven't got a clue."

The purpose of the presentation of findings has been to develop an analytic view--grounded in accounts--of the phenomenon of interest. All of the above factors (stereotyping, playing the role of recipient, experiencing a loss of control, experiencing patterns of instability, and being forced to mother one's children in public) may contribute to the identity which mothers form during the time they are homeless. In the following section, these findings are discussed and elaborated to facilitate an understanding of their efforts to support their children.

Interpretation and Discussion

At the general level, the results of this field study strongly suggest the relevance of identity theory for understanding the experiences of homeless mothers and their families. To begin, when the stereotypes associated with homelessness, concerning their ability to parent and support their children, are coupled with the way they are often treated by passerby's, volunteers and service personnel, these women may begin to question their own worth and abilities. These factors are often overwhelmingly negative and, if internalized, would aid in the development of a negative self image as a homeless mother.

Both women have encountered stereotypical beliefs and have worked to protect themselves as well as their children from their effects. However, the roles they play and expectations attached often undermine the power and control these women have over their own and their children's lives. Both have experienced periods in which they were unable to protect their children from harm. It is likely these experiences have left them feeling somewhat ineffective as people and as mothers. Further, the effects of these dynamics may be heightened through the constant reminder of their positionality and the need to be appreciative to those who are assisting (and perhaps stereotyping) them. In the end, they may come to view themselves as dependent and without agency. Moreover, the time requirements of being a recipient often result in the mother spending more time focused on her benefactors than on her children.

A paradox exists where the formation of a homeless identity meets other expectations of society. At

the macro level, society wants these women to have agency. The homeless are expected to take actions which will help them get out of homelessness and poverty. They are expected to be effective parents and hard workers. However, at the micro-level, as demonstrated above, the women are typically placed in positions of dependency. They are at the mercy of the shelters to allow them to stay; they are at the mercy of the state to provide them with resources and to allow them to keep their children; and they must often put the needs of the organizations and their benefactors above those of their family.

Moreover, the daily activities and interactions in which these women participate are more likely to produce compliant rather than independent behavior. Interactions with the volunteers and staff members of shelters and social service agencies simply do not facilitate the development of agency in a homeless mother. Thus, the behaviors and roles that these mothers learn to get them by in the short term may keep them dependent and homeless in the long term.

However, as discussed earlier, not all individuals simply incorporate new roles and elements into their identity, and such factors are subject to individual interpretation. There was no evidence that either mother completely succumbed to a new homeless identity. In fact, it is not unlikely that the mothers were, at one time or another, simply playing a role for the sake of the other actors.

Similarly, differences between the mothers may have made them more or less likely to internalize the homeless self. For example, Rachel and her children have been abused on more than one occasion. The effect of abuse on one's self esteem and sense of efficacy can be strong, harmful, and persistent. Further, Rachel expressed a feeling of responsibility for the abuse which her children experienced while living with different people. She indicated that support groups have helped her to some degree, but, to this point, she has been unable to access counseling for her children. Moreover, she has mixed feelings about leaving her husband. On the one hand, she feels responsible for "raising her kids on the street," and, on the other, she feels she had to remove her children "from that abusive situation." Thus, Rachel is having to handle the effects of abuse and feelings of guilt on top of the other difficulties she must face as a homeless single mother. Taken together, these factors may facilitate the development of a homeless identity.

The effect may be further compounded by extended amounts of time spent being homeless. While longer amounts of time spent being homeless may allow one to develop knowledge and experience regarding how to access services, it may also have a negative effect on one's ability to advocate for oneself, support one's family, and escape from homelessness. The longer that a person spends on the street, the more likely they are to stay there (Snow & Anderson, 1993).

Further, even if the mothers do develop a homeless identity, the amount of support which the mothers have may compound or ameliorate its affect on their ability to escape from homelessness. For example, the support which Liz had from her husband made it possible for her and her family to get out of homelessness in less than four months, while Rachel and her family have been struggling with it for four years. Having a partner gave Liz an advantage in several ways. First, her family had two incomes. This

allowed them to save their money and to eventually get an apartment of their own. Rachel is receiving AFDC while finishing her administrative secretary course and is unable to save any money at this time. Further, having two parents allowed Nathan to take a job with a schedule that required night work, but paid better than most jobs. A single mother, like Rachel, living in a shelter, would be less able to take a higher paying night job because of child care needs.

Being married also allowed Liz to share some of the responsibility for parenting with her husband. For example, at the beginning of the school year Nathan registered CC for school, while Liz worked, where as Rachel had to wait until she could get a day off during the week to travel by bus and foot to the school where she was planning to register her children. Every afternoon, while Nathan rested, Liz picked CC up from the bus stop, walked her home, and spent time focused on school related activities. Rachel commented that she often gets notes from her daughters' teachers about incomplete or missing assignments, but that she "can't participate like a PTA mom." Further, when CC's teacher was being insensitive to her situation, Nathan "took care of that," but Rachel has no one who can take over for her when she is tired, feels threatened, or does not want to deal with something.

Another difference is that Liz and Nathan had only one child, while Rachel had three. Not only is it easier for two parents to meet the needs of one child than it is for one parent to meet the needs of three children, but one must also consider the type of children for which the parents were caring. CC was indeed very energetic and talkative; however, when compared to Rachel's girls, CC was calm and quiet. Rachel described her girls as having a lot of energy and as impulsive, and she frequently commented on their failure to listen to or obey her. Further, Rachel had a four year old boy who, like her girls required a great deal of attention.

It is hard to say what Liz's situation might look like if she did not have Nathan. Compared to Rachel, Liz actually appears less independent. Nathan makes all of the major decisions in their relationship. It was Nathan who went looking for apartments, while Liz stayed with CC. It was Nathan who designed the budget that Liz followed. She, like Rachel, focuses on activities which are relegated to the day-to-day living of her family, while he engages in future-oriented activities.

However, as the results suggest while differences of situation, family make up and time being homeless each contribute to a mother's ability to cope with and negotiate the factors associated with homelessness, these are not the only factors to be considered. Both women were also affected by social forces beyond their control that affected their self image. The interplay between and among factors such as stereotyping, playing the role of recipient, experiencing a loss of control, experiencing patterns of instability, and being forced to mother one's children in public can either aid or decrease the ability of a mother to advocate for herself, support her family, support her children's education, and eventually to emerge from homelessness.

Conclusions, Implications, and Future Research

This research has provided a picture of the daily lives of two homeless mothers and their families.

The findings of this research have implications for service providers, educators, and policy makers and may be used to modify practices, research agendas, and policies to better serve homeless mothers. Additionally, findings from this and future studies may serve to give researchers a theoretical frame from which to ground their work, and identity theorists may see the utility of incorporating into their work the contextual variables identified in this study.

First, the study elucidates the difficulties which many mothers face while trying to support their children and the social forces which have both supported and detracted from these efforts. This study has demonstrated the effect which homelessness can have on a mother's ability to advocate for oneself, support one's family, and escape from homelessness. if individuals actively take responsibility for getting out of the often times vicious cycle of homelessness, then the approach to the homeless situation must change. A deeper understanding of the nature of homelessness and the way it effects individual's self esteem and sense of agency must be sought. And the role that service providers play in the cyclical nature of homelessness for many families must be considered. This information can be of use to both social service and school personnel.

Second, this research supports many earlier findings related to the effects of homelessness on children. That is, the children involved in this study demonstrated rowdy and often unrestrained behaviors and experienced difficulty in school. Each of the children showed signs of stress. They were continuously moved around and their families were ofne the only stability they had. School, can also provide some stability. Consistency with the same supportive teacher is important for the children.

Third, the study has identified an important gap in the research literature, the role of homeless mothers in their children's education. These mothers worked hard to keep their children in school and to ensure that their children were being treated fairly. Although the type and amount of support differed between the two mothers, it was evident that they believed education was important, and they made efforts to demonstrate this to their children. This information should be shared with those school personnel who hold false stereotypes about homeless mothers. Further, school personnel should attempt to facilitate the efforts of parents to support their children's education. Constant communication between the teachers, administrators and parents as well as accessibility of school personnel are important factors in facilitating parental efforts.

Fourth, the findings of this study supports other studies which argue that homeless women with dependent children have characteristics different from those of other homeless persons. Thus, they require services tailored to their specific needs and circumstances (Johnson & Kreuger, 1989). Such services are not adequately addressed by programs aimed at homeless women and the homeless in general. For example, homeless mothers are more likely to require socio-economic support as opposed to the psychiatric help and alcohol treatment recommended for other members of the homeless population. Homeless mothers and children have special concerns. For example, families fleeing an abusive father may be hesitant to give schools information for fear that they will be located. Services to

homeless mothers will be inadequate as long as the needs of homeless mothers are not well understood (Stoner, 1983). Consequently, more information is needed on how homeless women with children cope from one day to the next, how they provide for their children, how they locate and use services, and how their lives change (Butler, 1994). This, then, is the purpose of this study.

The traditional response to homelessness, thus, requires critical rethinking. Homeless mothers and homeless children should be thought of as members of family units. An interagency approach which takes into consideration the families strengths and needs as well as the strengths and needs of each member will allow service providers to more appropriately assist mothers and children who are homeless.

The focus of many public efforts are on the immediate needs of these families for food and shelter. If the reintegration of the homeless into mainstream society is our goal, then the present policies based on emergency shelters and care are inadequate. They are incomplete and disjointed. Further, present efforts leave families in positions where day to day needs are of primary concern and where plans for the future are hard to envision. These women are being effected by multiple factors, and, given their individual circumstances and personal differences, they experience homeless differently. Thus, intervention should take into consideration the strengths and weakness of each family and work with them as they move out of homelessness.[23] Centralized coordination may alleviate some of the structural problems which homeless families and individuals encounter.

Future research should be focused on exploring in more detail the findings of this research along with intervention strategies at all levels of the social system. The focus of the present research project was on the experiences and perceptions of homeless mothers. While this purview did provide illuminating results, it is difficult to determine where to take these findings until the state and local context is better understood. Thus, it would be useful to explore in more detail the perspectives of service providers as well as the actual services and resources the local school district, regional and state education agencies, and the state and local government provide. Moreover, examining the political culture in regards to attitudes about the homeless and other less fortunate groups might be propitious.

It is difficult, however, to make policy based on research with a sample size of two. If this research project were pursued further, it would be necessary to expand the sample size. Similarly, the sample should be diversified in several areas. Both women were involved in the church-shelter program. It would be useful to work with homeless mothers who lived in "doubled-up" conditions, motels, other shelters (e.g., the Salvation Army, Center for Battered Women). It is possible that women with other living arrangements may have had different experiences. Further, the children of both mothers were served by regular school programs, rather than by shelter programs or special classrooms. The emphasis placed on parental involvement may differ in a program or school that is focused directly on the needs of the homeless student population. Finally, elements of ethnicity and culture may also contribute to the mother's experiences of supporting their families while homeless. The sample should, thus, be diversified in terms of ethnicity and culture, living arrangements of the family, and school programs.

As indicated above, the observations made during the course of this study were very illuminating. However, I feel that I did not capitalize on this aspect of ethnography. If this study were taken further, I would recommend more emphasis placed on this method of data collection. In addition, I would recommend that observations take place in settings other than the church-shelter and day room. It might be useful to also observe in the children's school, in other agency locations, as well as in environments which are less supervised by homeless benefactors.

Further, the study would be strengthened by inclusion of perspectives of school and service personnel. This would be useful for several reasons. First, it may be useful to hear their expectations for and understandings of their interactions with the mothers. Second, the inclusion of multiple perspectives often provides are fuller picture of the phenomenon in question. Finally, including their perspectives would be helpful in terms of triangulation of the data. In the end, however, I feel the perceptions and perspectives of the mothers are paramount.

Finally, it would be important to revisit the literature based on the findings of this study. Research from other topic areas as well as current research being published on the homeless population may provide insight into some of my research findings. Similarly, the literature may hold suggestions for approaching some of the problems I have highlighted. In particular, I would suggest examining literature on low-income single mothers (mother-child relationships, mothering patterns, involvement in their children's education, children's school achievement), on the various school and social programs in this country as well as in countries such as Canada and Britain where homelessness is being met head-on by proactive policy and programs.

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"On the street or in a shelter, homelessness is hard living" (Liebow, 1993, p. 25).

Further, "homelessness can transform what for others are little things into insurmountable hurdles" (Liebow, 1993, p. 26). Two stories illustrates well this effect for Rachel. The first story involved attempting to obtain subsidized housing. She had to visit the site and the office in a certain amount of time.

> I had to bring my kids with me; I didn't have a choice. I didn't have a choice. I had to take them everywhere I went. And at that time it really wasn't easy because he was a baby that wasn't such a problem 'cept he was so little, but I did have a stroller. Those two [pause] wouldn't stay with me [got a stern look on her face]. One was always way ahead of me, and one was always way behind me, and there was always this fight--this "lets get away from mom"--this little game they played.

Endnotes

[1] Almost ninety-four percent of homeless families are headed by women (Redmond & Brackmann, 1990). Homeless mothers and their children include those families who at night sleep in shelters, in domestic violence centers, in churches, in the homes of relatives or friends, or in places that are not intended for human habitation (e.g., abandoned buildings, bridges, store fronts, or other outdoor environments). The essential criteria is a lack of fixed, regular and adequate residence (US. Department of Education, 1988). The McKinney homeless Assistance Act § 103 (1987) defines a homeless person as: (1) an individual who lacks a fixed regular, adequate nighttime residence; and/or (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is: (a) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); (b) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or (c) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used ass, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

[2] Families become homeless for a variety of reasons. The lack of affordable housing seems to be the primary cause of homelessness; however other recent social and economic changes are also factors. For example, the economic downturn of the early eighties coupled with the severe cuts in public spending on housing and public assistance during the last decade have contributed greatly to the number of homeless families (Daly, 1990).

[3] In some cities, such as Chicago and New York, homeless families total more than fifty-five percent of the homeless population (Blau, 1992; Waxman & Reyes, 1987).

[4] It has been argued that the counting of the homeless is political in nature. Considerable effort has been focused on determining the "actual" numbers of homeless individuals, and the numbers will differ depending on who is doing the counting and for what purpose (Daly, 1990). For example, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that the number of homeless people in

the U.S. is between 250,000 and 350,000 (HUD, 1988), but HUD's definition included only individuals who slept in shelters, welfare hotels, or in places not designated for human habitation. The estimate did not include families or individuals living with other families or individuals. Alternately, the National Coalition for the Homeless (1987) suggested that there may be as many as three million homeless people in this country. Similarly, a 1991 count of homeless children by the Children's Defense Fund was 2,000,000; however a Department of Education estimate during the same time period was only 450,000 children (Liebow, 1993). It is also important to recognize that the homeless are difficult to count. Not only are many homeless families moving around (mobile) and moving in and out of homeless situtations (cyclical), but different agencies often use different definitions when counting them.

[5] Exploratory research in the previously, little studied area of homeless women has increased significantly in the past decade. A number of qualitative studies have been undertaken. Liebow (1986) studied a heterogeneous group of homeless women in four shelters in New York city. Butler (1994) examined the lives of middle-aged homeless women in Seattle. Stark (1986) provides four case histories of mentally ill homeless women. Rousseau (1981) describes the lives of shopping bag ladies through the use of photography and life histories.

[6] There are questions about the ability of the participant observer to truly understand the experiences of their informants. How can a woman with a home and an intact support system see the world as these women see it or feel it as they feel it. However, I tried to put myself in the place of the other as best I could.

[7] Shelter schools are separate from regular campus programs and are argued to provide a number of advantages. For example, they are argued to provide an emotionally safe environment free from fear of humiliation (Egan, 1988), a smaller student-teacher ratio, and fewer transportation and attendance problems. Alternately, some argue that shelter schools allow public schools the opportunity to evade their responsibility to educate homeless children (Berger, 1990). Moreover, shelter schools often do not offer special programs for gifted and talented children or those with handicaps, music, or physical education.

[8] Very little is know about the characteristics of homeless fathers. Most studies use mothers as the respondent, leaving both single fathers and men in homeless couples underrepresented in the literature (McChesney, 1993).

[9] The poverty level for two person families is presently set at $9,841, and for three it is set at $12,320. One fourth of Americans working full time earn only enough to place them at, below,or just above the poverty line.

[10] In response to the difficulties families have encountered in their efforts to seek education for their children, in 1987, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act was enacted. This law protects the rights of homeless children to a free and appropriate education. It should be noted that the law does not exclude placement in shelter schools; however, Section 721 states that homeless alone should not be sufficient reason to segregate students from regular classrooms (Stewart B. McKinney Homeless

Assistance Act, 1987). Furthermore, the Act requires that states overcome barriers that impede the enrollment, attendance, and school success of homeless children.

[11] The National Institute of Mental Health encourages the use of ethnographic research in order to acquire a better understanding of the unique needs of homeless women (Koegel, 1986).

[12] After, we verbally discussed their rights in regards to their participation in the study, they signed a consent form, and I gave them a copy of the form.

[13] This information was obtained through a document published by the city. In order to ensure the anonymity of my research participants, then, I cannot provide the citation.

[14] Both Elliot Liebow (1993) in his study of homeless women and Ruth Behar (1994) in her study of Esperanza discussed the utility of opening your own lives to those who you are studying. They indicated that it helped to establish relationship of trust and openness. According to Liebow (1993) this kind of familiarity is very important to studies that involve participant observation. He describes it as a "quid pro quo" situation because the women may feel more comfortable talking about themselves when they know more about the researcher (p.xii).

[15] Prior to and during the process of this research, I became enmeshed in the collection of articles edited by Clifford and Marcus "Writing Culture" (1986) and in the postmodern critiques of ethnography generally, and the feminist critiques of postmodernism as well. I have found this discourse both useful and frustrating. Useful in terms of their possibilities and frustrating given the time-boundedness of the institutional semester. As a result, reflexivity became an important part of my research as I struggled to understand more than superficially the individuals involved in my study. Thus, I was attempting to learn about myself and my prejudices at the same time I was learning about the mothers with whom I worked.

[16] In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants in this study, all names used in this paper are fictitious.

[17] Physical and mental abuse causes many women to flee heir husbands. Some of these women lived with men who discouraged them from pursuing their education and other activities which would allow them to gain marketable skills (Bulman, 1993). As a result, it is difficult for them to support their families.

[18] Some call families like Rachel's "the cyclical homeless." Families like hers experience patterns of disruption, due to periods in temporary shelters, apartments, and unfamiliar and sometimes dangerous situations.

[19] Roles are sets of socially prescribed expectations for behavior, personality traits, duties, and privileges of an individual in a given position. The roles indicate how people in one position should interact with people in the same or other positions.

[20] On that evening, I felt like I had experienced what it felt like to be placed in the recipient role. I was already following all the rules, yet that conversation made the rules and the volunteer's informal power very real. Although I will never know whether the way I felt on that evening was anything like what the mothers

experienced, I have a feeling that it was. And it was not pleasant.

[21] Rachel indicated that she had taken a number of classes on parenting over the last few years. It is my assumption that she learned this technique in one of the classes.

[22] Parental involvement, as described in contemporary literature, includes specific school programs and school staff practices that engage parents in various aspects of the schooling and learning process. It like many other concepts has continued to become more or less important over time, and its meaning has changed. The present definition includes both the formal and informal activities in which parents and other family members participate to support the growth, development and education of their youth. Formal involvement, which is given more attention in educational literature than informal, includes traditional activities, such as volunteering, attending athletic, academic and cultural events, responding to a child's "discipline problem," or discussing a child's progress (Melnik & Fiene, 1990). Parents may also serve as advocates for their children, acting alone or by joining parent advocate organizations or groups (Epstein, 1986).

Informal involvement alludes to behaviors which generally occur outside of the school, such as assisting and monitoring homework, helping students with reading, playing games, conversing, taking educationally oriented trips, as well as meeting a child's basic needs, providing motivation and a means for securing financial support for school related activities, holding high expectations, and role modeling (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Lightfoot, 1978; Petrovich & Parsons, 1989).

[23] The diversity of families requires a diversity of services. For some families assistance may require a combination of services such as housing locator services, transportation, and help in completing applications for housing and designing a budget. For others it may require rehabilitation, crisis counseling, or support groups. Focusing on differential circumstances will prevent the delivery of unneeded services while concentrating service provision on actual needs.